

Study Guide for

LESSON 1

of the SCIS Educational Package

THE MIDDLE EAST IN TRANSITION

U.S. INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Even though it is several thousand miles from the Middle East, the United States often finds itself directly involved in Middle Eastern affairs. For example, the United States twice sent troops into Lebanon in the 1950s and the 1980s. It has frequently taken the lead in trying to negotiate a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It provides more foreign aid to Israel and to Egypt than to the rest of the world combined. And in the 1990s, the U.S. sent nearly half a million men and women to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf region to liberate Kuwait.

Why is the U.S. so interested and involved in this region? Is it because the Middle East has oil? Is it because the United States is so committed to Israel? Are there other reasons that American diplomats, military personnel, and other public officials concentrate so much on the Middle East? In this chapter, we will explore five reasons behind U.S. interests and activities in the Middle East.

1 Regional Stability and Geostrategic Concerns

Because the Middle East is strategically located across vital trade, communications, and transportation lanes between Europe, Asia, and Africa, the United States has long sought to prevent the region from falling under the control or influence of countries hostile to U.S. interests.

The history of U.S. involvement in Middle Eastern affairs began with the U.S. naval campaign against Tripoli in 1803 and 1804. More recently, from the end of World War II until 1971, the United States was content to allow Great Britain to "police" the Middle East. The presence of British forces in the Middle East was a holdover from Great Britain's colonial era, but the British presence did maintain a degree of stability in the region. For example, when in 1961 Iraq tried to acquire territory from Kuwait, Great Britain sent 45 ships to Kuwait's coast. Iraq backed down.

Nevertheless, even in this period the United States sometimes acted to defend regional stability and its own Middle Eastern geostrategic interests. In 1946, the U.S. sent a naval force to the eastern Mediterranean to counter Soviet pressure on Turkey. The same year, the U.S. complained to the UN Security Council that the U.S.S.R. had not withdrawn its troops from Iran at the end of World War II as Moscow had agreed to do. The Soviets then withdrew. In 1954, the United States took an active behind-the-scenes role in restoring the Shah of Iran to power. In 1957, the U.S. again sent warships to the eastern Mediterranean, this time to keep Jordan's government in power.

Then, in 1958, the U.S. sent marines to Lebanon to prevent the outbreak of a civil war and a potential takeover by forces the United States perceived as hostile to it.

In addition, in 1955, the U.S. helped create the Baghdad Pact, which included Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, and Great Britain. Since Iraq was technically still at war with Israel, the U.S. did not join. However, when Iraq withdrew from the Pact in 1959, the U.S. formed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which included Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, and the United States. The U.S. also kept military forces in the Middle East during this period to maintain its presence and to counter possible Soviet expansion. The U.S. Sixth Fleet has operated in the Mediterranean Sea since the end of World War II, and a naval group of two to four destroyers and one command ship has been based in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf since 1948.

This was a relatively small military presence. Thus, when in 1971 Great Britain withdrew its military forces from "east of Suez," the United States had to rethink its regional strategy.

To cope with the new situation, the U.S. government formulated the "Twin Pillar" strategy, in which the United States based the promotion of regional stability and the defense of its geostrategic interests on close relationships with two friendly governments in the area, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Throughout the 1970s, the U.S. collaborated closely with these two states.

The "Twin Pillar" strategy came undone in 1979 when Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution overthrew the Shah of Iran and when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Khomeini's revolution brought an extremely anti-American government to power, effectively destroying the Twin Pillar strategy, while the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan underscored the limits of American military power around the Persian Gulf. ☰

The U.S. began immediately to redress its weaknesses in the area. First, in January 1980, President Carter proclaimed the Carter Doctrine, declaring that "an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States." Carter also warned that such an assault would "be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

Next, the United States developed military force structures, airlift and sealift capabilities, and regional relationships that allowed it to better project military force into the area. The U.S. created the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, which became the Central Command, whose task was the defense of U.S. interests stretching from Pakistan to Kenya to Egypt. Other U.S. military units were restructured to permit fast movement over long distances, and also received extensive desert warfare training. In addition, the U.S. helped friendly regional states improve their own defense capabilities, and acquired access to facilities in Egypt, Oman, Kenya, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and in the Indian Ocean. At some of these locations, the U.S. stored military equipment for ground warfare, should it be needed at some future time. All these activities began during the last year of the Carter presidency, and were accelerated under President Reagan. 2 3

In addition to these activities, when warfare broke out between Iraq and Iran in 1980, the U.S. "tilted" toward Iraq for much of the eight-year war. There were two reasons for this. First, Iran was extremely anti-American. Not only had Iran held U.S.

Embassy personnel in Teheran hostage for over a year, but the Iranian government was actively participating in terrorist activities directed against the United States and other Western interests. Second, as had been the case in U.S. policy toward the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf region in particular throughout the Cold War, the United States did not want the region to come under the control or influence of the Soviet Union or any other country hostile to the United States.

Israel

The United States has also been deeply involved in Middle Eastern affairs because of Israel. Since Israel's creation in 1948, the U.S. has been an ardent supporter of the Jewish state, providing large quantities of economic and military assistance and extensive diplomatic and political support to Israel. Even today, Israel remains the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid. There are several reasons why the United States has been so closely identified with Israel.

First, because of the atrocities visited upon the Jewish people by the Nazis during World War II, there has been widespread sympathy in the United States to the need for a Jewish state, a homeland where Jewish people can live without fear of domestic persecution by the government.

Second, U.S. sympathy for Israel has been strengthened over the years by four major Arab-Israeli wars, in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. During the last three of these wars, Arab forces were supplied by the Soviet Union. Therefore, Israel was often seen in the United States as an American ally in the Cold War.

Third, despite disagreements and Israel's frequent willingness to pursue its own policies independent of U.S. preferences, Israel has often been a U.S. ally in the Middle East. Israel also frequently points out that it is the only democracy in the Middle East. The U.S.-Israeli relationship is strengthened because of this.

Fourth, the American Jewish community has often been an extremely vocal supporter of Israel. This, of course, adds to the already-strong support within the United States for Israel.

This does not mean that the United States and Israel see eye to eye on all issues. They do not. For example, ever since Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the West Bank during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the United States has refused to recognize Israel's occupation as legitimate. Similarly, the United States and Israel have had major disagreements over Israel's policy of encouraging Israeli citizens and new Jewish immigrants to Israel to move to and settle in the occupied West Bank. The United States has also on occasion objected to Israel's treatment of its Palestinian and Arab peoples, who are not considered full citizens by Israel.

Despite these disagreements, the maintenance of a free and independent Israel remains a primary U.S. interest in the Middle East. Virtually everyone agrees that the United States and Israel are close friends, if not formal allies.

The United States also considers the Middle East vitally important because it produces much of the world's oil (33 percent in 1991) and has 80 percent of the world's known oil reserves. Within the Middle East, the most critical subregions for oil production and oil reserves are the Arabian peninsula, and Iraq and Iran, both bordering the Persian Gulf. Thirty percent of the world's total oil production in 1991 and 75 percent of the world's oil reserves the same year were situated in these subregions.

The United States imports a sizeable percentage of its oil needs from the Middle East. Thus, in 1985, the U.S. imported roughly eight percent of the oil it used from the Middle East. By 1990, that figure had risen to about twelve percent, where it remains today. Most of these imports were from Persian Gulf states. Clearly, Middle Eastern oil, and especially Persian Gulf oil, is important to the United States' economic health.

Middle Eastern oil is even more important to the economies of other Western industrialized countries. In 1991, Western Europe imported about 33 percent of all the oil it used from the Middle East. Two thirds of Western Europe's Middle Eastern oil imports were from the Persian Gulf area. In the same year, Japan imported over 50 percent of the oil it used from the Middle East, almost all of it from countries bordering the Persian Gulf.

When in 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait, the oil reserves under Iraq's control increased from about 10 percent of the world's known oil reserves to about 20 percent. This caused considerable concern in the United States and elsewhere in the West. However, of even greater concern was the fear that Saddam Hussein, Iraq's leader, intended to order his armed forces to continue down Saudi Arabia's Persian Gulf coast and establish control over Saudi and United Arab Emirate oil reserves as well. Had Iraq done that, Saddam would have controlled about 54 percent of the world's oil reserves.

This reality was a major reason that the United States responded so forcefully to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Some people even concluded that the primary reason for the U.S. response was because of oil. The U.S. denied that this was the case, arguing that other issues, such as international law, morality, and the future of the post-Cold War international order, were at stake as well. But no one denied that oil played a major role in the U.S. decision to oppose Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Preventing the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction

The United States has long been concerned about the spread of weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons—to the Middle East, and elsewhere around the world as well. Given the hostilities that exist in the Middle East, preventing the proliferation of these weapons in this region is an extremely high U.S. priority.

Unfortunately, this is a difficult objective to achieve. Most analysts agree that Israel already knows how to build weapons of mass destruction. Many believe that Israel already has nuclear weapons in its arsenal or can build them on short notice. Among

other Middle Eastern states, Iran, Iraq, and Libya either have the ability or are trying to develop the ability to make nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

Recently, U.S. attention in this regard in the Middle East has been focused on Iraq, both because of the Persian Gulf War and because of Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam also used chemical weapons against the Kurds, an ethnic group living in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran that has been fighting to establish its own independent state. Although the United States had long been aware of Iraq's efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. and the rest of the international community were amazed to discover after the Persian Gulf War how advanced the Iraqi nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs were.

This discovery guaranteed that preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction will remain a major U.S. policy objective in the Middle East. However, the central question remains, "How do you accomplish this?"

Human Rights and Justice Issues

Human rights and justice issues abound in Middle Eastern affairs. Here, as elsewhere, the United States has long maintained that it is vitally concerned with promoting human rights and justice. And here, again as elsewhere, the United States has two central difficulties with promoting human rights and justice.

The first difficulty is defining human rights and justice in the appropriate regional context. If a government denies rights to people living within the country that it rules because of their religious or ethnic background, and that government is based on a culture or religion that approves of such discrimination, should its actions be ignored, or should they be criticized and condemned? If a religion teaches that women should be subservient to men, are women's rights being violated? If two groups have competing claims to a specific piece of land, and both groups' claims go back decades and even centuries, whose land is it? Why?

The second difficulty for the United States is deciding what policies to implement to promote human rights and justice once they are defined. Should the U.S. apply political or economic pressure to influence a country to change practices that the U.S. believes violate human rights or are unjust? If so, what kind of political or economic pressure, and how much? If a country claims that the practices it is implementing are based on its religion, how should this affect how the U.S. responds? Should military force ever be used to promote human rights and justice? If so, how?

These and related questions are difficult issues to resolve in any context. In the Middle East, they are even more difficult to resolve because of the long histories and deep animosities that lie behind many of the conflicts, and because of the way politics and religion are intertwined throughout the region. These questions are also complicated by alliances and friendships that the U.S. has in the region and by the Western world's need for oil.

Despite these complexities, the United States cannot ignore Middle Eastern human rights and justice questions. Formulating appropriate answers to these questions has

perplexed U.S. policymakers for years, and nothing indicates that clear and unambiguous answers are on the horizon.

Issues for the U.S. and the World

The Middle East has clearly been a major area of U.S. interest since World War II. During the Cold War, the leading U.S. concern was to ensure that the area did not fall under the influence of the Soviet Union. By and large, the U.S. was successful in maintaining an advantageous position over its rival. However, the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 was a major setback to U.S. strategic interests since the pro-American government of the Shah was replaced by the staunchly anti-American regime of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Other U.S. interests in the Middle East have included commitment to the security of Israel, access to oil, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and to a certain extent, human rights and justice issues. In their discussions on the SCIS Videotape The Middle East in Transition, Lesson 1, "U.S. Interests in the Middle East," the former Secretaries of State and Defense explored several of these U.S. interests. Among the issues they raised were:

1. **whether the end of the Cold War has altered the nature of U.S. interests in the Middle East.** Since the U.S.S.R. is no longer a threat to U.S. interests in the region, what challenges U.S. interests in the Middle East today? With the Soviet threat gone, is the Middle East as important to the United States as it was during the Cold War? Why?
2. **whether access to oil will be a major source of U.S. concern in the 1990s.** Secretary of State Vance argued that the United States should try to become less dependent on Middle Eastern, especially Persian Gulf, oil, and former Secretary of State Shultz agreed. Do you believe that they were right or wrong? Why? How could the U.S. become less dependent on Middle Eastern oil?
3. **whether the U.S. can persuade China and Russia to curtail their arms sales to Iran.** Several of the Secretaries noted that the Russian economy is teetering on the brink of disaster, and all that Russia had to sell was arms. Former Secretary of Defense Schlesinger also observed that with the U.S. selling arms to Middle Eastern countries, it was difficult for the U.S. to persuade others not to. Former Secretary of Defense Carlucci countered that if the U.S. stopped selling arms, the net result would be simply to turn markets over to others. How can the United States resolve this policy dilemma?
4. **whether the United States should insist that countries in the region protect human rights and promote justice.** How far should the U.S. go in terms of insisting that governments in the Middle East not violate human rights? Should the U.S. apply political or economic pressure, or threaten the use of military force, against governments that blatantly violate human rights and justice?